# “It’s ugly and thick” – Displeasing design in private households

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**Abstract**

Our research data suggests that designed products such as a Compaq laptop or a Marcel vase generate emotions of displeasure and indifference in their domestic, everyday context. In order to explore the causes of emotional linking to design, this paper examines arguments such as, “I hate this bookshelf…” in relation to a product’s biography and the social context in which the product is placed. It is proposed that the emotional linking with designed products stems from a household’s investments in learning about design and that often the social context determines a product’s ‘career’ in the household more than the product’s appearance or character. More generally, this paper suggests that the framework of the ‘moral economy’ of the household and the notion of domestication provide an approach to help understand products in their everyday context.

**Keywords:** design, social aspects, domestication, moral economy

## Introduction

Our research data consisting of photographs and interviews in private households suggests that while people apparently become attached emotionally to products, there seems to be in domestic environments surprisingly many well-designed products that generate emotional contradictions expressing indifference and displeasure. While it is, then, the product itself that appears as displeasing or indifferent, the subject of this paper is to propose an alternative approach by examining the social context wherein the product is placed.

There are several approaches which explicitly deal with how people operate socially in everyday living (e.g. Goffman 1959; Blumer 1969; Sacks 1992; Moscovici 2000) and others that also focus on objects (e.g. Baudrillard 1968; Vygotsky 1978; Douglas & Isherwood 1979; Latour 2005). However, the framework of "the moral economy of the household" (Silverstone *et al*. 1992; Silverstone 1994) provides an intriguing approach from the point of view of design research, since the framework outlines an everyday social context where the objects are placed through a process called "domestication".

The term domestication refers to how people tame objects but are tamed by objects as well (e.g. Grönman 2006). From this perspective, one can examine what happens to a product during its 'career' in the household, how it is displayed and used, how it is talked about and how people link emotionally with the product. The framework emphasises that each of these aspects of the product's "biography" (Silverstone *et al.* 1992: 17-18; Kopytoff 1986) reflects the workings and principles of the household's moral economy. In other words, it is maintained that everyday living can be studied through looking how people live with objects and what meanings they allocate to them. Studies inquiring into the social aspects of how we live with objects have focused on "ordinary objects" (Putnam & Newton 1990; Koskijoki 1997; Dant 1999; Miller 2001; Gregson & Crewe 2003), works of art (Halle 1993; Painter 2002) and interior decoration and design (Clarke 2001; Sarantola-Weiss 2003; Grönman 2005). However, technologies (Bull 2000; Cockburn & Dilic 2002) and, especially, the impact of ICTs on everyday living (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992; Silverstone 1994; Lie & Sørensen 1996; Lally 2002; Silverstone 2005) have been a major area of research, sometimes explicitly benefiting from the notion of the household as a moral economy.

The moral economy of the household framework defines the private household as an "economic, social and cultural unit" (Silverstone 1994: 49). This unit integrates with the formal economy and the public space through domesticating immaterial and material objects (products, ideas, programmes etc.) (Silverstone 1994: 98-99). Because households apply different meanings to objects that are available to them on the global market, even socio-economically similar households domesticate different sets of objects and, accordingly, differ in terms of lifestyle from each other (Silverstone *et al*. 1992: 19; Silverstone 1994: 49). The domestication of objects and the processing of meanings take place in a context that social scientist Roger Silverstone and his colleagues thereby call the moral economy of the household. Their framework outlines the predominant social processes through which the household creates, maintains and displays its "moral, emotional, evaluative and aesthetic environment" (Silverstone 1994: 49). Metaphorically speaking, people and objects are constantly involved in negotiating the principles according to which domestication and the processing of meanings are worked out. At the same time, the domestication of objects affects and modifies the household's understanding of its identity and style (Silverstone *et al*. 1992: 18-20).

According to the moral economy framework, objects domesticate into everyday living through four non-discrete phases (Silverstone *et al*. 1992: 20-26):

- Appropriation: the authors refer to the different ways an object may enter the household. For example, it may be bought, found, inherited or received as a gift.
- Objectification: this term translates roughly as the relatively systematic ways that the object is displayed and thereby integrated into the space of the household.
- Incorporation: refers to integration in time and to the ways the object is used in the household's activities.
- Conversion: the authors point to several ways objects can again transcend the boundaries of the household and are, for example, discussed and displayed in public. For instance, discussing with colleagues last evening's television programmes or recent purchases is seen as conversion of these objects.

Of these phases of domestication, objectification and incorporation take place inside the household and the phases of appropriation and conversion transcend the household's boundaries.

In the context of the framework, it can be asked, then, what kinds of emotional processes are involved in the domestication of designed products? Moreover, if people are negotiating which of the available objects are domesticated, why are products that appear indifferent or displeasing allowed to occupy space and time in the household?

## Data and methods

The research data was collected in two phases and is comprised of 28 semi-structured theme interviews and photographs collected in 14 households in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The first phase took place in 2004 when the interviewees were asked to present "designed functional products" in the household and talk about the biographies of the products (Silverstone *et al.* 1992: 17-18; Kopytoff 1986). The products and the general interior decoration of the apartment were also photographed. The second phase was conducted in 2005. Again, general photographs were taken and, based on the photographs from the first phase, the interviewees related what had happened to the products following the first interview. Altogether, about one thousand product biographies and approximately 1400 photographs were gathered.

The sampling group was recruited using the snowball method, with the sole criterion being that they should be educated or professional in a field that is comparatively knowledge intensive and which either emphasises aesthetics or clearly lacks emphasis in aesthetics in its education and daily practices. It was thought that experts and professionals would, in principle, have equal "access" to design available in the market but, at the same time, most probably would allocate diverse meanings to designed products (cf. Bourdieu 1979).

| Table 1. Interviewees: profession and estimated age | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. Non-designers (N=10) | | |
| | Investor | 45 |
| | IT expert | 40 |
| | Journalist | 50 |
| | Marketing Manager | 45 |
| | Clergy (Protestant) | 30 |
| | Media Researcher | 30 |
| | Detective Chief Superintendent | 60 |
| | Political scientist | 40 |
| | Technology Researcher | 45 |
| | Chief Executive (Midsized company) | 50 |
| B. Designers (N=7) | | |
| | Ceramics and Glass Designer | 30 |
| | Furniture Designer (2) | 30, 30 |
| | Graphic Designer | 30 |
| | Industrial Designer | 30 |
| | Interior Designer (2) | 25, 30 |

Based on this data, it was first seen that the domestication of objects generates emotions of pleasure, indifference and displeasure and that these emotions often relate to the transcending of the boundaries between domestic and public space. Secondly, it was tentatively outlined how the expressions of pleasure, indifference and displeasure might stem from the principles that constitute the moral economy of the household.

**Living with design is not always wonderful**

*That [Compaq laptop] is simply awfully ugly and thick, but, well, as long as it works, it is fine.* (ANNIINA 2004: 365-369)

*I was almost happy that it [a Marcel vase by Timo Sarpaneva] fell to pieces, like, huh, we got rid of it (laughs). We didn't need to break it ourselves. (HANNELE 2005: 550-551)*

Our data suggests that even clearly designed products such as a Compaq laptop and the Marcel vase generate emotions of displeasure and indifference in some households. Since we live in a world where amazingly beautiful design is supposedly available to every person regardless of wealth and taste, why, then, are people not constructing for themselves "perfect" environments instead of continuing to live with annoying or meaningless design?

Following on the ideas of Heinrich Wölfflin (1915), philosopher John Armstrong concludes that we have to learn what pleases us aesthetically and that the learning of the style one prefers involves rigorous education and concentration (Armstrong 2004: 145). In his famous study on taste, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu also emphasises education and shows that taste, subsequent style and also the competence with which cultural products are talked about are all affected by formal education more than social background (Bourdieu 1979). From Bourdieu's perspective, judgements of taste are part of the symbolic capital according to which society is structured. In terms of taste and style, society can be divided into three classes, where both the highest class ("the sense of distinction") and lowest class ("the choice of the necessary") function with relative ease in their own respective understanding of what constitutes proper principles through which cultural products are evaluated. In the middle, however, is the broad class of petit bourgeois, which has the "cultural goodwill" to make proper distinctions but insufficient education and/or adequate social background to succeed in the task (see also Fox 2004). At one point, Bourdieu describes the life of this middle class as "an anxious quest for authorities and models of conduct" (Bourdieu 1979: 331).

According to these views, constructing a pleasing environment is a question of knowing and competence: if we only knew what truly pleases us, we could construct an aesthetically perfect environment according to our financial means. In some cases, of course, this holds true. However, the results of our data run contrary to this assumption; it seems that it is often the knowing what pleases aesthetically that causes displeasure in the moral economy of the household. More generally, it is the household's contradicting principles of moral economy that cause displeasure. If there is no contradiction between principles, then the product's domestication goes smoothly and the experience is something from pleasurable to indifferent, depending on the intensity allocated to the process.

This line of thought can be illustrated by drawing from the examples provided by Hannele and Ilmari in our data.

Hannele is a 50 year old journalist, Ilmari a 45 year old researcher. Both live in Helsinki city centre and stylistically their households resemble each other (Figure 1). Neither have any formal education in aesthetics, and their income and assets are roughly similar. Hannele is married and has adult children living in their own homes, while Ilmari has always lived alone.

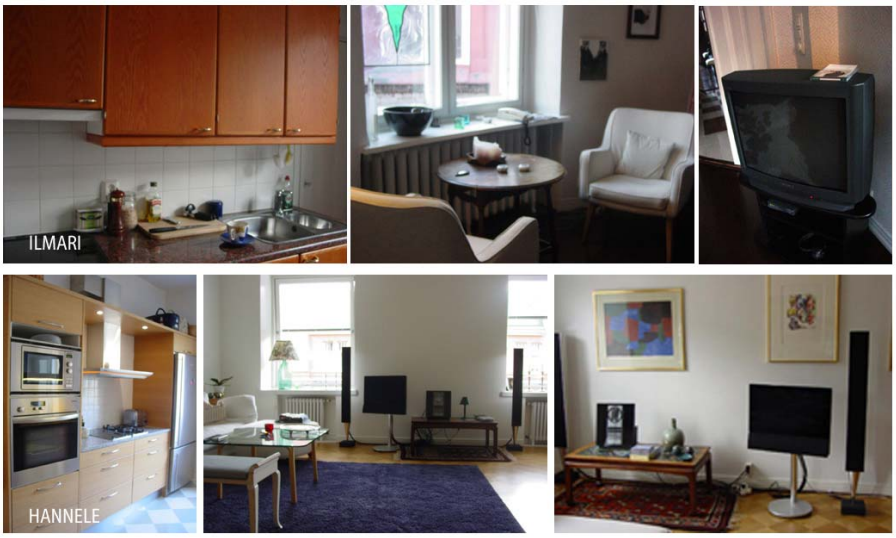


Figure 1: Kitchen, living room and television from Hannele's and Ilmari's households.

Despite their apparent similarities, Hannele's and Ilmari's households are very different in terms of design. Ilmari mentioned design brands when he talked about the product biographies of an Aarikka gift set and another present, Fiskars scissors. Hannele, on the other hand, mentioned, as designed functional products, items by Arno Jacobsen, Svenskt Tenn, Bang&Olufsen, Timo Sarpaneva, Lundia, Artek, Alvar Aalto, Villeroy & Boch, Gunnel Nyman, Birger Kaipiainen, Atelier Lyktan, Ikea, Marimekko and Arabia/Iittala. Hannele's and Ilmari's comments also imply that the functioning of their households' respective moral economies is based on divergent principles according to which they evaluate their environments and relate emotionally to the domestication of designed products.

Hannele illustrates nicely how pleasurable the phase of appropriation can be:

*This television is a new purchase and discovery about which I'm really very happy because here in the kitchen we spend lots of time and when one cooks and reads magazines, one turns it on, so it has been a very good acquisition.* (HANNELE 2004: 141-143)

However, Hannele's living with the products is not always so delightful. She is very displeased with the style of the old Lundia bookshelf in the study and is thinking about buying a new one from the design store Skanno (HANNELE 04: 104-106). She is also rather annoyed with the inherited period pieces and classic but common Kilta dishes she must store in the apartment (HANNELE 04: 276-278). In addition, Hannele thinks that, in principle, most gifts and mementoes one receives are horrible or useless and she routinely gets rid of them (HANNELE 05: 318-321).

Ilmari, in contrast, is either mildly pleased or simply indifferent that other people, relatives and strangers alike, are constantly bringing or giving him things, few of them clearly designed:

*That lamp and that table, my parents have simply brought them here [...] I have never said a word against it, like, if they want to put curtains here, it is fine with me (laughs).* (ILMARI 2004: 232-241)

Thus, we have two households. One is acquainted with well-known design, and the interviewee expresses explicitly emotional arguments about the products' domestication. The other household has very few items produced by design brands and the interviewee seems to be more interested in observing what happens in his household than what the "happening" products actually are.

In closer reading, Ilmari's apparent indifference to the products that occupy his household seems to derive from his social relationships. He allows his parents to decorate his apartment, because he sees it benefiting his parents as well as himself:

*They are already quite old, but my father, he's happy knowing that he's able to do something useful.* (ILMARI 2004: 234-235)

In Ilmari's view, it is valuable to let his parents show care and affection by bringing him pieces of furniture and kitchen devices while he is abroad. The same applies to the gifts he has received and preserved, which for Ilmari can be seen as representing his social relations with his relatives, other people and even organisations (cf. Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981). Metaphorically speaking, Ilmari's household resembles an ecological niche where he, as one of the inhabitants, observes natural and sometimes fascinating events, the domestication of objects that is taking place in his apartment. Consequently, Ilmari is not much motivated in controlling the aesthetic and stylistic qualities of his household.

Contrary to Ilmari, Hannele's aspirations to monitor the aesthetic and stylistic qualities of her household are relatively strong. By exaggeration, it might be said that Hannele tends to get annoyed with nearly anything which is not her own choice and tries to occupy the private space of the household. She also actively eliminates design that the household had appropriated during an earlier period when tastes were different. But Hannele also subscribes to the principle of the value of social relationships. Despite her annoyance, she conserves the period pieces and tolerates the design she does not use or even like because she wants to preserve them for her children who currently cannot take the dishes and furniture because their households have even less storage space than Hannele's apartment.

**Linking emotionally with design**

Of the two interviewees, Hannele has a long history of learning about design. The domestication of a Finlandia vase designed by Alvar Aalto started with "the young couple's decision to invest in classic Finnish Design" in the 1970's (HANNELE 05: 202-208). Ilmari, on the other hand, does not mention encounters with design brands or design classics, other than mentioning his fascination with the logistical wonders of the store Ikea (ILMARI 05: 25-36). One might say that Ilmari is not learned in design in a similar sense as is Hannele who has been practising recognition of design and developing her taste in aesthetics all her adult life. Following Bourdieu, one might say that Hannele habitually makes distinctions between products and that the distinctions converge with those of the canonical "design world" (cf. Becker 1982; Danto 1998). From the point of view of the design canon, Ilmari can be seen as

an outsider. He cannot make the distinctions; neither does he seem to care about this lack. Indeed, while Ilmari is mildly happy in his household, Hannele expresses more often annoyance than pleasure when she is relating the product biographies.

There are variations in how people use the notion of design in creating emotional links to products. As we have seen above, Hannele defines her emotional attachment to designed objects not only through ordinary emotional processes that link people and products, but also through the fact that the products are design objects. To Ilmari, the concept of design is practically meaningless but Hannele, in a sense, becomes attached to objects mainly through their designed attributes and their character as design objects.

It undoubtedly takes learning and orientation to recognize design. More generally, households can be seen to be constantly allocating their limited resources of both money and, especially, time to different matters (cf. Silverstone 1993). The kinds of matters that a household invests in can be seen to indicate the orientation of that household's moral economy. It seems that emotions emerge in relation to this orientation. Hannele's household has invested time in learning about design, interior decoration and their household's style. Consequently, the notion of design is used as one important orientation point in the household's moral economy against which everything else might be evaluated. Ilmari, on the other hand, has not invested time or money in design. Although he is not entirely ignorant about design, Ilmari is more interested in how people use the concept of design or products in general, rather than investing his own resources in the products.

It can be outlined, then, that since Hannele's household has an orientation to design, the domestication of designed products generates emotions of at least pleasure and displeasure. Respectively, Ilmari's household does not have an orientation to design and therefore designed products, or more precisely, design in products, are met with indifference. But while this outline perhaps explains why Ilmari continues living with design he finds indifferent, it does not explain why Hannele domesticates design she finds displeasing. Therefore, it should be explored further the consequences "having an orientation" to something has to the workings of the household's moral economy. In other words, what happens in the negotiations on the moral economy's principles, when in Hannele's household it is agreed to let displeasing design stay?

The short answer is that even though Hannele's own taste in design has changed, she accepts the value the persons she cares about see in classic Finnish design. The more complex answer departs from the notion that it varies how intensively the principles operating in the moral economy are actualised in practice. Indeed, it might be that households ordinarily negotiate on how much intensity should be allocated to each of the principles operating in a particular situation, but the principles themselves are mostly "self-evident", the very aspects that construct what we understand as everyday living. In a sense, the set of principles resembles a machine that keeps everyday life going, but as a machine, it is far from a pre-programmed automaton. It is actually difficult to imagine what kind of moral economy would result from an absolute, compulsive subscription to any of the possible principles or orientations. Usually households seem to have a mixture of active principles, pointing in several directions and actualised with varying intensity.

The intensity with which the principles are put into action thus differs from household to household and also within each household in different times and even places. For example, Hannele's living room is taken care of more intensively than the study, and the redecoration of the apartment is intensified in order to be finished in time for her child's graduation party (HANNELE 05: 12-19). Thus, although Hannele's household can be seen to maintain a rather intensive aesthetic control over the apartment and what is domesticated into it, the interior decoration is a result of constant negotiations involving several persons, events, products and even the apartment itself (Clarke 2002). Metaphorically speaking, in household negotiations these social and material participants argue with varying strength, and, it seems, quite often the principle valuing social relationships wins over aesthetics. More generally, households (or individuals) are rarely omnipotent agents who could or would even want to live according to only one principal orientation to for example design. However, if there is a conflict between the principles of valuing social relationships and aesthetic dispositions, the situation is likely to generate annoyance and displeasure.

## Conclusion

In the light of this tentative exploration, design for pleasing everyday living is, to say the least, a complicated enterprise. The moment the designed object starts its career in the household, it is likely to produce displeasure if the household is aware of the value of design

and, therefore, prefers not to rid themselves of designed objects that do not fit the household's current aesthetic preferences. Households routinely domesticate and display products due to the intensity invested in social relationships (e.g. gifts from relatives), even if the products' features disrupt the households' domestic aesthetic and are thereby emotionally displeasing. In addition, in case a household prefers controlling its private space, an object transcending the household's boundaries is found displeasing if it is not of the household's choosing. In this sense, sometimes "ugliness" or "uselessness" do not strictly speaking refer to the product but are used as excuses for not letting the object occupy the private space. On the other hand, if the household does not care about its boundaries and does not have an orientation to design, the design in the product will most likely be met with indifference. Fortunately, at least in cases when the household is design-oriented and the product meets the aesthetic criteria, design can be seen to cause pleasurable emotions.

It should be emphasised however that this outline is based on a short analysis of a few conspicuous aspects of the research data. Ongoing research will assuredly enrich the picture. Nevertheless, it is proposed that examining the intensity and orientation of principles is one way of making sense of the ways with which households relate emotionally with the products that occupy private space. Interpretation of data provided here is based on the framework of the moral economy of the household (Silverstone *et al*. 1992). In general, the framework is a timely and much needed attempt to bring objects into the context of social, everyday living. In this it succeeds, I believe, at least in the sense that it allows one to consider how the social duties and preferences that actualise in everyday living link with designed products and can sometimes be seen to determine the emotions related to design more than the actual designed product.

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